

ON CLOWNING AND THE MORRIS

Clowns and Morris Fools belong to the same tribe. By considering the first it can help the modern performance of the second.

Clowns have been long associated with circuses in the public's mind, however, for various reasons, circuses have been in decline for many years, but clowns have had a growing independent life over the last 50 years. They are frequently involved with children's activities, as on TV and at schools and various festivals.

For example every year since 1985, about April 1st, there is an International Clowns Convention at Bognor Regis, which has lectures and seminars and two open days of public performances, as well as many local visits to schools etc. All the world loves a clown. Every clown is an anarchist. They deal in chaos and mayhem but in the nicest way. They love fun, they disobey the rules and create havoc. This is the public's concept of a clown, a big red nose, funny painted face, outrageous clothes and boots, from an ancient tradition with which everyone is familiar even in the morris. The Chipping Campden Morris had a retired US circus clown as their fool in the 1930's. He often brought the dancing to a stop by making the dancers laugh too much!

Folk fools of many sorts through history have contributed to the modern wide ranging concept of a clown, but the performers that have grown out of the circus are modern entertainers with little of the serious elements which once formed a significant part of the folk role. In less sophisticated cultures the making fun of important things itself carried an educational message. The licence of the fool to do and say what would normally be unacceptable within a community was once a common element of seasonal celebrations within our own society.

“WHAT’S IT ABOUT?”

You can not simply put on make-up and a costume and dash around a dance area and expect the audience to see you as a clown. Nor is the clown's role a way of using up surplus or poor dancers. Clowning is really a serious art form and to be effective needs to be approached in a disciplined and systematic manner, even though the essence of the humour is to appear spontaneous and intuitive. Untrained and possibly undisciplined clowns can at best be embarrassing and at worst a menace. When out with the morris, a clown is a link between the audience and the dancers and sometimes vice versa, as for example in making the environment right to bring in members of the audience, especially children, as volunteers into the show. The interaction with the audience is the key. Unlike in almost any other performing art, the clown can acknowledge and work with the audience directly. If the person designated clown is not prepared to interact, then they have been nominated to the wrong character in support of the morris.

THE MORRIS FOOL'S ROLES

What you do has to fit in with the opportunities that a performance of the morris allows. The Morris Fool is usually expected to fill a number of roles in support of the show. Some that require clowning are to,

1. Produce entertainment to give the dancers a rest,
2. Fill the gaps between the dances,
3. Cover up mistakes and accidents by distracting the crowd,
4. Demonstrating personal non-dancing skills,
5. Occupy the children who can become a menace either through boredom or excitement.

What would be intolerable from a member of the public can be acceptable from a street theatre character. There are also the further roles which may not involve any clowning, but for which the person involved

may be better able or better placed to do compared with anyone else, eg when the dance troupe is small or to save time, but only at the request of the team leader,

6. Announcing,
7. Giving out and collecting the implements,
8. Dancing in the set as a straight man,
9. Controlling passing traffic and crowds,
10. Asking for and collecting money, although I think that this is a function that is “out of character.”

The interaction with members of the audience conventionally comes from directing the morris fooling at someone, so that it becomes “at the expense of”, meaning that it interferes with it some manner.

Causing merriment can be at the expense of the,

1. Dancers eg. by following close behind and mimicing,
2. Leader eg. by making faces or contradicting commands,
3. Dance eg. by trying to get involved with the dance and probably failing, say, trying to copy steps,
4. Musicians eg. by winding them up with an imaginary key,
5. Individuals eg. by hitting someone who is looking the other way in the Crowd with a bladder to make them jump,
6. Dancing eg. by using a rehearsed routine which may or may not need props, say, borrow a bicycle or pram and travelling through or around the set, with or without a passenger,
7. Planned Show eg. by distracting everyone by using a target of opportunity that catches one’s eye, say, pretending that a temporary road sign is something else.

To do this the clown must be following and understanding what is going on, all the time that the role is needed. The degree of interaction implied requires an experienced dancer for the job. The clown has also to learn when to do nothing and when not to be within the audience’s attention. While not in the centre of attention the clown may have to invent business just to provide an excuse to be in view, because the inverse of doing nothing for extended periods and then injecting an activity can be a disruptive contribution. Clowns should learn a little about body language of watchers in order to judge the crowd’s attitudes to the show, as this determines what they ought to do. With practice it becomes second nature. Understanding body language is important to any morris dancer as it is easy to give an opposite message to that intended through ignorance. The traditional morris fool is not a useful guide as to behaviour, first because there have been so few of them since recording started, and second because we only have a few anecdotes and these date from a time when humour was more inclined to horseplay. Today people get revenge via the courts! The fool near Stow who wore a padlock and chain instead of a watch would, when asked the time by someone who thought that they were going to take a rise out of the clown, hit the questioner over the head with the padlock saying “just struck one!” Jinky Wells got fun from being noticed to be wearing odd socks.

The fool, and the other characters, are part of the morris show, and have to make a balanced contribution even if it is not truly integratable! But they should not continuously interrupt as they are only a part of the morris. The “morris” is the totality of the performance, not just the dances, and includes the good luck and other seasonal relics. The clowning can limit the tension in a show. The clown jokes to relieve tension and is therefore not to be the sort of character who can be dangerous or frightening that actually creates tension. In a major sense the clown and the dancers compete for the audience’s interest. There can be two separate but intermeshing shows, with attention switching to and fro.

WHAT IS THERE TO LEARN?

So what is the relationship of the conventional clown with the morris fool and what techniques do they share? There are differences, for example the morris fool should not have to sustain a show on their own. To be a better fool requires thought, practice and a sensitivity to people and things.

Clowns should not be foolish and stupid, ie not a “natural” idiot. Clowns are silly, but acting silly for their own enjoyment and providing entertainment for others are significantly different things.

Working with a second party comes naturally to most people. It allows spontaneity and can be over quickly. It is noticeable when watching the movements of a typical modern morris fool that their business is normally very fleeting, and this is why they can get away with very little training (or skills!) There are circumstances which need set pieces and extended business and to prepare for these occasions personal skills have to be worked up. The following sections are aimed at a next step in developing personal clowning skills and perhaps for those who might be thinking of working on their own, for example at Folk Festivals. It is not all at one pace, clowns need to be appear serious and light hearted in turn, like the old music hall artists. Whatever the style or approach clowning is to be played to its fullest and enjoyed!

One can also join a number of local clown clubs for classes, workshops, advice and experience and the learning of circus skills. One can learn mime, juggling, balancing, puppetry, balloon sculpturing, conjouring, stilt walking, and unicycling. There are tips to be gained that ease the learning problems with any manipulative skills. For example when wanting to juggle it is important to work with the weak, usually left, hand till it is as easy to use as the other, and it is essential not to rush moves which is what a dominant hand encourages.

THE CHARACTER'S CHARACTER

What do the great clowns have in common? Very little, each is distinctive.

The First Major Step in learning to clown is to discover the clown character that works best for you, the one that you are comfortable with and which is both funny and believable.

The Second Major Step is to use and integrate any personal skills you have to both present and serve your clown character.

Just being very large or very small can be exploited. You do not play for laughs as does a comic, you let them arise naturally from the character. You should want laughs at the character not at you. You are no more the persona of your clown than is the actor the character in a play. Of course some people grow and reflect their clown persona throughout their life, but only a few! As not everything can be completely spontaneous, much of what is done needs to be worked up. In doing this one evolves a style of one's own. To be successful the clown's character needs consistency, and should not be a ragbag of perceptions of other people. Stunts, tricks or routines which work with one team may not for another, so it is not sufficient just to slavishly copy someone else's performance, there must be an understanding and an appreciation of the why and wherefore. Without presenting a clear character, it is all too easy to confuse or even in the extreme to intimidate an audience. The clown must motivate their actions to make the character believable. Otherwise it is both aimless and pointless to the crowd and a destructive interference with the show. After gaining a lot of experience it may become instinctive, but initially it is important to think about and plan what is done.

One must separate the idea of “image”, which consists of of costume, make-up and overall appearance, and “character”, which is the personality being expressed. Your image helps project your character and helps express the kinds of things your persona does.

The First Exercise is to try some simple everyday activities in the style of a possible character in order to find which has possibilities for you. As it is always difficult to think of any on the spur of the moment, try being,

- (a) young, shy and inexperienced,
- (b) overlarge, goofy and dominating,
- (c) grumpy, fed-up and foolish.

It is important to get used to practicing in front of a mirror (reflecting window_ for self criticism and to get the support of a friend (not a relative) for polishing. But practice misses the essential audience ingredient.

Despite the above comments maybe it is more desirable in some situations for a club to have a standard club fool persona that several can adopt and learn, although most such teams seem to achieve this by mimicry not practice. This policy seems inherent in having a club owned costume for the character.

Clowns have been called a variety of names, each of which gives a possible indication of a character - buffoons, comics, fools, harlequins, jesters, joeys, jokers, merry-andrews, mimes, mirthmakers, and pranksters - and they have been described as - bizarre, clever, clumsy, eccentric, extravagant, foolish, funny, odd, preposterous, ridiculous and zany. Clowns are all these and more.

APPEARANCE - CLOTHES

The costume should fit the character. There are four common or archetypal modes of dress or “motley” even for morris fools.

1. Smock and Hat, which are probably worn over a normal morris kit. It has the advantage that it allows the “character” to be able to disappear by just slipping the clothes off discretely. That is such a help when walking around on your own. But it can be very hot, as it is an extra layer of clothing.
2. Medieval Jester or Circus Clown, with a more elaborate costume and probably a decorated face, but so that the “character” can not easily disappear.
3. Man-Woman, dressed in clothes of the opposite sex, sometimes the kit of a linked or rival neighbouring team.
4. Top Hat and Tailed Coat or other formal attire, appearing well dressed but having had better times.

None of which match the traditional circus clown types which have developed since Astley’s first Circus in 1768. These are the whiteface pierrot, the foolish auguste and the tramp. The morris fool is, as might be expected, more like the older style of character clowns.

The possibilities are actually endless, but it is very wise to avoid some of the grotesque get-ups seen at carnivals if any rapport with the crowd is to be achieved. “Grotesques” ought to be classed with Animals not Clowns. Masks and Halloween characters have also to be avoided! It might be just possible to have a character like the villain of Victorian melodrama whose overacting makes him comic and not frightening, but that would seem out of style with the Cotswold Morris. The usual requirement on a costume is looseness. It is frequently made more effective by being very colourful. Coats are often covered with buttons and badges which themselves help provide talking points.

APPEARANCE - MAKE-UP

Until the mid-1800’s most circus clowns wore very little makeup. With the increasing size of audiences the faces painted on became bigger for easier visibility, and evolved into the present recognised forms. As spoken dialogue became less practical, at the same time routines developed around physical comedy and pantomime, using exaggerated movements and oversized props.

The aids to a character's appearance are gloves, strange hair, funny shoes and pockets for things. What is a clown without makeup? If you want to be accepted as a real clown, you have to look like one. A poor makeup job identifies one as a person **dressed** as a clown, not a **REAL** one. The possible loss of body language from the face has to be compensated for in other actions.

Use professional makeup. Keep outlining as sharp and as even as possible. Set it and dry it by powdering. On a hot day powdered makeup will last several hours and a light powdering in the middle of the day is enough to freshen it. Remove from normal or dry skin using baby oil, or baby shampoo if oily.

There is an important point about face make up. The circus clown emphasises the mouth and eyes so as to look friendly, but it is quite possible by using heavy make-up about the eyes to look frightening, especially to young children.

“Blacking” is a cover or disguise. Besides the risk today of giving cultural offence, it traditionally implies being up to no good, despite the popularity of the Nigger Minstrel Troupe.

SILENT ART OF MIME - ILLUSION

We all use mime or body language for the non verbal component of communication. Physical movement can be used to express most thoughts or actions, as everyone knows who has played charades or other similar party games. Mime is the art of silent expression, portraying an action, thought or concept through movement and making apparent an emotion without using words, and creating an illusion which makes the invisible visible to the watcher's imagination. To do this one must convey both a sense of space and of size, that is, where things are and their shape and weight. Clowns rely on mime to create the physical comedy that is characteristic of their art. Many perform entirely in mime, never speaking a word.

The value of exercises is that they force thought about what one is doing.

Typical Group Exercises :

1. while handling an actual object, show to the audience that it is to be thought of as something else.
2. improvise a skit given from the group the names of a person, a place and a thing.
3. pass an imaginary object around a circle then ask the participants afterwards what it was.

Some Classic Solo Exercises :

1. Meeting the invisible wall,
2. Being inside a box,
3. Walking a tightrope,
4. Taking part in a Tug of War.

One should start to create one's own morris useful impressions.

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER

A good clown is not a two dimensional cardboard replica acting a script. They need a “presence” and a personality. At the same time they have to appear “open”, not defensive to the audience, which means appearing to suppress the normal personal space barrier, so being “vulnerable”. This implies letting the audience know what you are thinking and feeling from your actions and from the reaction and interaction with the crowd and your response to individuals within it. The clown's responses should appear genuine, yet still consistent with being a larger than life performer. Consequently the clown's behaviour can not be limited to rehearsed acts. The aim is to be expressive and communicative, so that you can reach and touch something deep in the individuals that make up the crowd, and this can become the ultimate personal

objective in developing the clown skills. The involvement with the audience puts the clown on the crowd's side with regard to the show and this special relationship has to be understood and tolerated by the rest of the performers.

Any clown uses movement, cartoonlike imagery, costume, control of pace, sometimes words, sounds and personal skills, and, most important of all, a specific character to make people laugh. They can make stupid mistakes, trip and fall down, not see obvious solutions to simple problems and generally make "fools" of themselves. People laugh with the performance not only because of the content and style of the clowning but because they recognise that everyone makes mistakes from time to time and they appreciate the fellow feeling of experiencing embarrassing and awkward situations in which we feel foolish. The clown exaggerates human behaviour so that it is not unreasonable that they go to crazy, absurd or even outrageous lengths to achieve what they want. However in our culture a clown is still supposed to be a person, not an animal or creature, and should avoid any distorted or weird characteristics which would not fit with the clown spirit.

It needs practice to become a good clown. Some techniques, such as falls, can need the assistance of another at the beginning. A major problem is finding advice on the tricks of the trade. Demonstrations and personal explanations are worth far more than written words or diagrams. The working up can not be approached with any feeling of embarrassment, especially during any practice session. When you practice with others around, avoid being a "prat", that is letting your embarrassment or nervousness get in the way of what you should be doing, so that you are stupid, not constructive. Remember that a clown projects attitudes by means of expression generated with the entire body. You are funnier if you can work with physical movements and much more interesting to watch. If you exaggerate emotions, intentions, reactions and activities, the audience will understand more readily what is going on. The audience should not have to ask, "what's that, and what are they doing?" One has to work on both exaggerating the dominant gestures and on supporting them using the whole body.

The Second Exercise is to stand in front of a mirror and try and work up some exaggerated facial and body expressions that indicate particular emotions or intentions. It is surprising at first how difficult this is!

SILENT ART OF MIME - EXAGGERATION

Clowns, unlike actors, do not display with normal actions but use obvious exaggeration. The emotions, thoughts, actions, reactions and personality are expressed with the entire body, a caricature of normal movements, eg exerting tremendous effort to accomplish little.

To mimic a person you must interpret their perceived personality using body language, so it is an understanding of body language is something that one must develop. Practice techniques for conveying attitudes and emotions. Base the activity on actual observation and do not rely on memory which may be fragmentary.

Try showing -

1. **Anger** - flex the muscles in the face into a tightly contorted frown, then raise a fist, stomp both feet, show the teeth, and finally jump up and down.
2. **Excitement** - jump around while clapping hands, then hugging oneself and showing others what has made you happy.
3. **Being Tired** - walk around very slowly, dragging the feet, with arms limp and mouth open, shoulders slumping, inserting stumbles as walking, and stopping to rest and wipe the brow.
4. **A Punch** - pull an arm all the way back, wind it up, and swing it forward in a wide arc.

The first step is to define what expressions, feelings and actions are wanted. Practice ways of communicating with your body. A face with little expression has the same effect as speaking in a monotone. Explore with the mirror the making of silly faces. Practice to a mirror but try and look at yourself from someone else's perspective. Now add some body movement. Try for the personality traits and act them out. But make every movement express a specific feeling or thought. Then practice in front of someone and ask them to identify what you are expressing.

To develop another useful skill repeat the earlier exercises, but now do them with slow, exaggerated movements - in "slow motion".

Other performers have to be carefully observed and analysed rather than just noticed. A good source to watch are the old silent comic movies, sometimes still to be seen on TV.

Typical points are,

1. Lessons can be picked up from acting techniques, especially with regard to the size and speed of gestures. Gestures have to be seen and interpreted by the watchers over a much greater distance than is usual in normal inter-personal behaviour. Movements look better if you can stand open to the majority of the audience, if you turn towards them rather than away, if you start off travelling with the foot furthest from them, the so-called "upstage" foot, and make gestures with the upstage arm.
2. Beginning clowns tend to move around too much with short, fast and fussy movements. When you express an idea, emotion or intention, do it as efficiently as possible, cutting out the unnecessary movements and making sure that the ones included are clear and carefully timed.
3. The clown also needs a grin, especially for naughty behaviour, or to go with the occasional more obscene gesture.
4. A clown walk helps express the absurdity of the clown. The walk can be identifiable and stylised and can be used frequently.
The morris clown often dances around in time with the dance, but seldom matches the teams steps and can be quite idiosyncratic.
5. A clown's props will be mostly things borrowed or picked up, like morris sticks or umbrellas. An old felt hat can be a good prop as it can be used in expressing emotions or to symbolise a wide range of objects. It can be an enemy, friend, gift, handkerchief, obstacle, pillow, steering wheel, symbol of wealth or poverty, toy, weapon etc. But buy one, do not borrow it!

A key concept is that the clown plays to the audience one person at a time. A second or so to each will produce more rapport than a long session of stand-up comic routine, usually spoken looking over the heads of the punters. The individual in the crowd is important - playing to the crowd is distancing oneself, like being on TV. It should be noticed that the cinema and TV encourage comic actors not comedians because they are preprogrammed not responsive. Remember that they also have an expectation of what a clown should do, which will be a mixture of all the comic and clowning things that they have ever experienced in their lives.

THE "BUSINESS" & SOME DEFINITIONS

As "attitude" is a frozen pose, or snapshot, held in the middle of an action. As it is expressing something that you are wanting or waiting for the audience to catch, it is not a relaxation but a holding. Particular examples are the "take" when reacting with a frozen attitude or facial expression, usually to something surprising or unusual. Then there is the "slow burn" when slowly expressing something like being about to burst into action or burn up with rage.

A sort of organised series of actions with a beginning and an end is a "routine". Each routine has an objective which is its motivation. "Actions" and "activities" translate the routine into movement. Activities are sub-actions or specific things done to support an action. A routine can be divided into "beats", like paragraphs in writing, each containing an idea. The end result of a routine has to be funny,

and if it is a fall or other action that could appear to cause a hurt, then the clown must appear unhurt at the end.

The beginning and end of a routine are key moments. One needs a good first impression if the audience is to be attentive and responsive. It is a common experience that first impressions gained in the “first four minutes” are critical to anyone’s attitudes to any meeting or performance. Entrances and exits should be strong, emphatic and simple. One should ensure that there is a reason for the entrance and exit. Possible excuses for coming on are, to escape from someone else, to look for something, to swat a fly, or to wander in innocently not realising what is going on. A clown could have a personal, symbolic “hello”. To exit you have to leave the audience’s attention area or otherwise indicate that you have dropped out of the action. An exit after a surprise ending is called a “blow off”. The ring around a morris team is difficult to work in as the audience is “in the round” on all sides.

No matter how many of the audience are to be recipients of a stunt or routine, the action has to be “staged” so that the audience can “focus” on it. The speed and rhythm of the action and hence its effectiveness depend on “timing”, all of which helps you to “sell the routine”. The clown should be sensitive to whoever is being the “straight man”, whether it is the team leader or a member of the crowd.

The terminology is important because good ideas are easily forgotten and need to be jotted down. Each routine is flexible and the performer needs to experiment with all its potentialities. Do not repeat anything that you are unhappy about, there will always be plenty of other possibilities. Also try not to repeat good ideas exactly or too often and make them stale, as does an oft repeated verbal joke. Remember that one has to capture the dancers interest as well as the changing crowds.

PHYSICAL COMEDY ELEMENTS

Humour can be separated into two broad categories, verbal, ie jokes and stories, and non-verbal, ie body movements and facial expressions. Clowns rely on the latter, they are now inseparable. An inexperienced clown usually lacks the skill to express himself effectively. He has to learn to act like a fool without being one. In verbal comedy a joke becomes stale after a while, it no longer comes as a surprise. In physical comedy, eg the pie in the face, the foot stuck in a bucket, we can watch the routines repeatedly because everytime the actor reacts differently and the “same” situation takes on a newness that makes it funny time and time again. It is advisable to use real cakes in slapstick, at least they can be licked off!

One of the major elements of humour is the occurrence of the unexpected. Any deviation from a predictable sequence has the potential to be funny. If the audience expects something to happen, and it does, there is no surprise and it is not funny. The funniest jokes require spontaneity with little or no warning that something unusual is about to happen. But surprise alone does not guarantee a laugh, the unexpected event or punch line must be related to what is going on at the time. It is the story or buildup that makes the punch line funny.

Slapstick is the comedy form using apparent physical discomfort and pain, such as falls, blows and slaps, but in which the actor never really gets hurt. Just being hit or falling is not funny, its the recipients reaction that makes the slapstick effective. Bending and hearing a clothing rip is funny only when the person reacts with embarrassment and/or fear.

Reactions are a vital element in physical comedy. Often used is the “double take”, one of those second glances that confirms the unexpected. Running gags with variations on a theme are worth developing, especially with unexpected twists in the repetitions.

Timing in comedy is important, and the performer must pace themself. It needs practice for it to become instinctive. The audience has to have time to react, to laugh.

For example, organise goofy applause, get them to move hands in circle for a 'round' of applause, clap lips, buzz the lips with a finger, slap knees, clap while bending over, clap both hands, then right knee and left knee to sound like a galloping horse, pop the mouth with a finger, jump and clap, beat chest for Tarzan, flap arms like a chicken, shout quack, quack like a duck, hold nose and say phew!

The 3 Stooges are an excellent inspiration with quick fire situations. As an example they form a pseudo pyramid standing three in a row, by the outsides hooking their inside foot behind the centre's knees and, holding hands, leaning outwards. Another old clowning trick is to pass handkerchiefs but as one has a ball in its middle it can be bounced at one point.

WORKING WITH YOUR AUDIENCE

Any performer working with an audience, whether clown, magician, or standup comic, should be able to grab the attention of the audience and lead them to feel any emotion desired appropriate to the act. For the clown this is slanted to humour and fantasy.

When working in pairs the one with the most bizarre makeup and clothes will always be expected to play the fool.

When working with a partner, real or dummy, you are performing more of a play. It is then easy to project feelings. When working solo the method has to be slightly different because you must talk to the audience, through careful choice of actions and words, either asking for a particular response or obtaining it by performing universally recognised physical movements.

Some non-verbal signs are, a wave of the hand on entry as a "Hello", a wave while stepping back to convey that the act is over and you are leaving, a hand to the ear or a palm lifted upward asking the audience to respond louder or more vigorously. You treat the audience like they are a group of friends.

It doesn't all have to be dumb show, one can talk to them. Tell them to do something, have them all participate, choose helpers so that they feel part of the show.

Clowning is a form of communication, the clown expresses things to the audience, they respond with applause, laughter, groans (if they are enjoying themselves) or even boos or silence (if they are not). When not enjoying it, they are also telling you something! It is not a two way conversation if one side does all the talking and doesn't seem to listen. The louder, longer and more frequent the response, the greater their enjoyment. You increase their enjoyment by getting them involved. "Participation" is a key word for keeping the attention and interest of an audience. Think of the success of games, group songs etc. It makes the audience feel special and creates a more personal relationship. Use them as often as you can.

Engage the audience from the initial warm-up. They get to know you and it shows who is in charge of this part of the show. It captures their attention and sets the mood for what follows. Particular possibilities are,

1. enter through the crowd shaking hands and waving to everyone.
2. shout hello and get them to respond till they give all they've got.
3. have an applause, shouting or singing contest between two groups.

Some audience participation ideas.

1. chose a "cheering" section, maybe with as few as one, to cheer or shout on a cue, which could be a word, or a gesture such as a wave, sticking thumbs in ears etc

2. have a magic word, either related to the theme of the show, the current “business” or just a piece of nonsense.
3. have a “magic” action, eg roll down the socks and croak like a frog,
4. do some of the “business” within the crowd.

Choosing some of the volunteers.

The rest of the audience will feel involved. Do not ask for volunteers, chose them, avoid anyone likely to be shy. Ask questions to get to know them,

1. they know you are a friend,
2. erases fears of being on stage,
3. introduces them to the audience,
4. gives you an idea of what you cooperation you’ll get.

Add innocent questions looking for unexpected responses.

Using a volunteer.

They do not actually have to help in anything! Perhaps just hold a prop or display a sign. Another way is to get them to mimic your actions. This could lead to having a contest between two volunteers. One could have a “band” with simple percussion instruments, eg blocks of wood, pairs of stones, tin lids. It also helps the quality of the audience relationship to try and give a small gift to helpers no matter how trivial.

Be sensitive - avoid offence by ridiculing or embarrassing anyone in the audience. A clown has no bias regardless of age, sex ethnic or religious background.

Hecklers act as they do primarily to get attention, therefore be understanding and get them to help, you don’t have to get even with them, try and be a friend. As some hecklers do not quiet down you had best deal with them early on. Be prepared, they may be from the party you came with!

When working in front of an audience, try and work out, if you can, what they reacted to and why they laughed, or why they did not. Perhaps you will need another person to help you make these post-mortems. Take this work seriously, but do not intellectualise too much, the objective is to have fun and be spontaneous and to remember that next time it will always be a little different. The more you rehearse and the more you know what you are doing, the easier it is to play with the act and experiment. What makes each performance different is the changing crowd, as anyone who has played in a stage show or pantomime for a number of nights will know, each night having its own rapport.

Each routine has structure and it may be worth developing a check list for one’s first attempts. It needs headings such as,

1. Structure eg Entry, beginning, meeting, conflict, resolution, exit.
2. Content eg Mimicry, discovery, trickery, stupidity, blow or fall, suprise.
3. Work Up eg Outline, rehearsal, explorations, polishing, testing, notes, rework.

The character must be maintained through a routine. One tries to stay in character throughout a show, but this should not be held so when chatting seriously. Be prepared to explain your costume and role to enquirers. Try and drop into the background for such moments, after all the clown is not restricted to clowning.

A common experience in the performing arts is that one needs about 3 times the material that can be used in a single show. This is equivalent for a clown of about 50 odd bits of business that can be slipped into as required. With the comedy pair Abbot & Costello, the fat man never knew what the order of the act would be, thus sponataneity!

EXERCISES

Only elementary stunts can be sorted out live with a crowd, so there is a need to develop oneself using exercises. Simple things to try are, freezing, switching from one attitude to another, the walk, stylised movements, mimes, entrances, the character you are, and the initial creation of routines. Other aspects need some experience of working in the open, such as how to appear and disappear from attention, how to be “open” and interactive. You will also find that you need a special approach geared to certain types in the audiences, like babies, children or pretty girls!

“**AS IF**” is a significant phrase to a clown, you do things “**AS IF**” certain conditions, usually imaginary ones, are affecting you.

The Third Exercise is to try behaving as if you need to be loved, to be accepted, to be allowed to join in, to inflict embarrassment. It is very difficult to do at first, but persist.

Some routines include “falls” which need to be practiced. It is wise to start using a cushioned surface. Before you try a fall do a warm up to minimise the risk of hurting yourself. You use your hands to slap the floor, both to create the sound of falling and to break the fall. The arms must be bent a little at the elbow on touching so that there is give - it is rigidity that leads to broken bones. The rest of the fall is achieved by landing on something somewhat soft (buttocks) and rolling. But remember to end looking unhurt, even if you are not, by grinning, moving immediately or jumping up.

Slapstick or fights require simulated blows which do not actually connect but for which the receiver claps their hands to provide the noise of the slap or punch while jerking the supposedly hit part away. A “slapstick” was once an instrument for belabouring with a built in clapper, similar in noise and effect to the morris fool’s bladder. Spectators should not be the butt of any joke. The clown is the silly character and he, not the audience, should end looking the fool or being on the receiving end. With care one can have a stooge in the audience who becomes the innocent victim of a routine, but it must always become clear that the recipient is part of the act before it is over or the crowd will be alienated.

In general the morris clown has as a potential partner anyone around, and the other dancers, the leader or the other characters can be involved in preplanned activity. These you can slap, trick, fight, outdo, outsmart, and develop comic relationships with - but if you are on your own, you have to make props, real or imaginary, do this for you. Props may be wayward, defective or break, you may use them improperly, or they have a mind of their own. You create a personality for the props by treating them like people, love them, get angry with them or throw them around! Beware of what you do with the animal, otherwise children will copy it and make life a misery.

The traditional accompaniment to the clown is his stick with a jester’s head, or bauble, known in Hampshire as a “Jack”. This tool can be used as an elementary ventriloquist dummy. The morris fool has a bladder and cow tail on opposite ends. Bladder work on people can be useful, but it is not important. Dancers do not appreciate it and in excess it can encourage children to become a nuisance. Remember the pun that someone with a weak bladder is an embarrassment!

Experience suggests that fooling must not be too choreographed with the dancing - this is the role of the animal - and it does cut across the link role with the audience. The Tommy and Betty of the Rapper can have parts in their dance, but even here they are usually played for the laughs.

You can use the audience, ask them to help you solve something, or get someone to volunteer to help you, and get them to applaud or boo when you want it.

There are numerous classic clown gags, mostly quick and easy to fit into gaps in a show.

THE LAST DEEP BREATH

The worst moment for the clown is just before coming on, being prepared and dealing with stage fright. Many things can carry you through once you have started. The Stand-Up-Comic is advised to talk over the heads to the persons at the back, officially because it appears to involve everyone, but really because it is actually helping to combat nervousness.

Rehersal and performance build up confidence. Concentration helps one to relax and be less self conscious. The techniques of acting require concentration and focussing and this, plus your imagination working on the possibilities around you, will reduce awkward feelings.

However there is still that moment just before. The tension can not be avoided but it can be accepted as natural. Actors often take a few deep breaths immediately before an entrance. Before you start, follow a discipline to energise, use warm up exercises, you are as likely to strain muscles as any dancer, and relax and clear the mind. Think inwards, called “centering”, to recognise your own inner resources for what you going to do. A strong “centre” frees you to extend yourself physically and to be a little outrageous.

EXAMPLES

It is interesting, but cruel, experience at a workshop to ask someone to suggest something that should be “funny” and then get them to do it with a dancing set. Most times it is not funny because the action is expected. The same thing happens in a club when the characters are asked to work up some business - the team is often well off without it. The fun must grow out of the activity, its absurdity, outrageousness or unexpectedness.

What works for me? My character is aggressive, determined to be one up, or even two, and large! Being large, the others are cautious in how they retaliate. I have had an “Andy Pandy” blue striped suit since 1956. In France the people were very puzzled at my behaviour until they thought of Oublix of the Asterix strip cartoon!

Here are some of the things that I would do,

1. Comment loudly on the leader’s announcements or just be personal, and polish their shoes with a handkerchief (theirs if you can) when you have been naughty.
2. Run in with a stick, especially if it is a handkerchief dance, while it is forming up, but eventually find that there is no place available.
3. Stand where the set has to pass, eg in Black Joke Adderbury, and just move away in time, or then again, do not.
4. Watch the steps with amazement and slide off to the edge for a quiet but visible practice and come back and do it wrong.
5. Tag onto the end off the set during the dance and follow it for a while and then cheerfully sail off the wrong way at some time.
6. Get involved in one of the fights in Swaggering Boney, either by helping one corner, getting caught up between the two corners, pushing a reluctant corner forward, or jumping in too far so that there is collision from which one of you bounce off.
7. Take a rest in the middle of the set, say during rounds.
8. Chase after the leapers in Leapfrog, either never getting to a leap, or threatening to go over in the wrong direction, or just bladdering bottoms.
9. Dance up the middle of the set at the end of a dance to take all the glory.
10. Pass through the set in a stick dance but escape just before the sticking begins.
11. Use a stick to make the rest jump over it during rounds.

12. Use two sticks and try to do both sides of the stick tapping and get into a mess.
13. Terrify the music, threaten to tighten the accordion straps, pass a handkerchief under the fingers, blindfold them or wind them up with a pretend key, tie their bell pads together, all because they can not do anything back to you while they are playing.

I have said nothing about “patter” as I have never cultivated any standard spiel. There are many almost standard/traditional speeches around which can be used as the basis for developing one’s own.

I have a number of stunts, mostly usable indoors. Perhaps the one that I enjoyed most was the “One Legged Bampton Dancer.” There are occasions when the messy cake in the face routine works, but it is only fair to use a real cake not a replica made with shaving cream. At least the victim should be able to lick it off! (But please, not treacle!)

WINDING OUT

Being a clown is not an absolute license for behaviour, it has to be acceptable to the audience/community. It goes hand in hand with the mastery of elementary skills which will also need patience, concentration, self-discipline and restraint to develop.

The biggest problem for the morris fool is the morris team. Few dancers see the show as an integrated performance and stand in front of the audience, walk around, talk and otherwise distract, especially when something like a familiar set piece by the clown or jig dancer takes place. Familiarity breeds indifference. They have no concept of being inobtrusive and really need to be choreographed by the club leader.

This article is not a complete guide, it raises some issues at both a philosophical and a romantic level and gives limited practical advice, but primarily the initiative has to come from you who must want to be a clown.

There has been a problem in writing the advice because my experience is that of the morris fool and little of being a separate clown. There are numerous classic clown gags, particularly when working in pairs or trios. Watch good sources such as the Three Stooges on TV. Need many more exercises

There is very little helpful literature for clowns on the practice of the art compared with the documentation of its history. I found “Clown for Circus and Stage” by Mark Stolzenberg, from Sterling Publishing, New York, published in 1981 and 1983 and distributed in the UK by Blandford Press, and “Creative Clowning” by eight various people, from Java Publishing Co, Colorado Springs, USA, in 1988, the most inspiring and I am indebted to them. The first I believe has been revised as “Be a Clown”, pub in 1989.

Improvisation is the art of performing without rehearsal. It can be funny because it is live and no one knows what will happen next.

One should consider the role of handclapping in the morris and the lack of a connection with traditional games.

It is worth remembering that **“the map is not the territory, the word is not the thing it describes”**, even though one can not talk or write about anything without words which imply properly defined concepts, only actual experience will bring home what these things really mean in practice.